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War in Gaza weakened Arab states, emboldened Israel, says Vali Nasr

Scholar notes Pakistan currently enjoying 'diplomatic honeymoon' with Washington, which won't last for long

By Ahmad Fraz Khan

LAHORE: Iranian-American academic and political scientist Vali Nasr suggested on Friday that the war on Palestine had politically weakened Arab states and emboldened Israeli leaders, to the point that the latter had abandoned the two-state framework entirely.

Speaking at a session titled 'The Gaza War and the Remaking of the Middle East', moderated by journalist Najam Sethi, Mr Nasr implied that the situation has proven detrimental to the Palestinian cause.

He said Israel now believes it can pursue its objectives primarily through force. "With Arab states politically neutralised, Israeli leaders see little incentive to return to negotiations," he added.

According to him, Israeli leadership now views political compromise with the Palestinians as a security liability rather than a pathway to stability, effectively abandoning the two-state framework.

Following the Gaza war, Israel moved against Hezbollah in Lebanon, significantly weakening the group's operational capacity. The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024 further altered the regional balance.

Hamas, Hezbollah and the Syrian government, long aligned with Iran and regarded as part of the so-called "axis of resistance", were effectively dismantled.

"With this strategic buffer around Israel gone, Israeli policymakers believed they could confront Iran more directly," the political scientist said, referring to Israeli-US military strikes on Iran in October 2024.

He said Arab states have also seen their influence in regional affairs diminish, leaving them increasingly sidelined. Israel, Mr Nasr argued, has concluded that military strength is now its primary guarantee of security.

As Iran's regional influence declined, Arab and Muslim countries reassessed Tehran's strategic importance as a symbol, pillar, and financier of resistance. "Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Turkey moved to restore and strengthen ties with Iran, recognising its symbolic and geopolitical counterweight to Israel," he said.

Mr Nasr also said the events of Oct 7, 2023 marked a turning point that reshaped regional politics and power dynamics. "In many ways, everything in the Middle East changed on that day," he said.

Until then, he explained, US strategy in the region centred on normalising Saudi-Israeli relations, expanding the Abraham Accords, building regional trade corridors, and linking Middle Eastern economies with Europe and India while bypassing China.

"The events of October 7 pushed the Palestinian issue, which the US and many regional allies had put on the back burner, back to the centre of global attention," Mr Nasr said, adding that Israel's security doctrine has since undergone a fundamental shift.

He also criticised the "Board of Peace" initiative announced by US President Donald Trump, calling it ineffective because it excludes Palestinians. According to Mr Nasr, several participating countries joined mainly to maintain favourable relations with Trump rather than to advance a genuine peace process.

Despite the shifting landscape, the political scientist said key questions remain unresolved.

"The future of Gaza is still unclear. There are also uncertainties surrounding the role of a potential Pakistan-Saudi defence partnership and how Iran and Turkey will manage their competing interests in Syria," he said.

However, he concluded that the regional balance of power has already undergone a historic shift. "The Middle East has entered a new phase, and this transformation may well be permanent," he said.

'Diplomatic honeymoon'

In a separate discussion, titled 'Pakistan: Between the USA and China', Mr Nasr argued against the view that China's rise is irreversible and America's decline is inevitable, advising middle powers such as Pakistan to focus on strengthening their own technological and economic foundations.

Sharing the stage with former foreign minister Hina Rabbani Khar and journalist Raza Rumi, Mr Nasr described Pakistan's current relationship with Washington as a diplomatic "honeymoon", which had so far helped shield Islamabad from difficult questions regarding its strategic ties with China and its defence cooperation with Saudi Arabia.

"This relationship has also helped Pakistan avoid scrutiny over its conflict with India, largely because it played its diplomatic cards well," he said.

Noting that Pakistan had also benefited from the recent strain in US-India ties, Mr Nasr cautioned that this favourable phase may not last long.

"The United States effectively has two centres of power — one represented by the White House and the other by permanent institutions such as the State Department and the Pentagon," he said.

"Pakistan is currently engaging mainly with the White House and benefiting from it, but the institutional system is likely to reassert itself and reopen uncomfortable discussions."

Ms Khar largely agreed with Nasr's assessment, and called for Pakistan to deepen its alignment with China — which she described as more predictable and consistent in its diplomacy — while maintaining constructive relations with the United States.

"The US remains a global superpower and Pakistan must remain on the right side of Washington," she said, but warned policymakers not to assume that this situation would last.

RUSSIA'S President Vladimir Putin welcomes US President Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and US special envoy Steve Witkoff, during a meeting at the Kremlin.—AFP

Russia, Ukraine face off in UAE talks

No sign of compromise as Zelensky terms Donbas dispute 'key question'

KYIV: Ukrainian and Russian negotiators will tackle the vital issue of territory during two days of talks in Abu Dhabi starting on Friday, each side said, with no sign of a softening of their positions to end the four-year war.

Ukraine is under mounting US pressure to reach a peace deal in the war triggered by Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, with Moscow demanding Kyiv cede its entire eastern industrial area of Donbas before it stops fighting.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said the territorial dispute would be a top priority of the next round of talks in the United Arab Emirates.

"The question of Donbas is key. It will be discussed how the three sides..., see this in Abu Dhabi today and tomorrow," he said, responding to questions in a WhatsApp media chat a day after talks with US President Donald Trump at the World Economic Forum in Davos that both leaders described as positive.

The talks in the Gulf were due to begin on Friday evening, a Zelensky aide said, and resume on Saturday morning.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's demand that Ukraine surrender the 20pc it still holds of the Donetsk region of the Donbas — about 5,000-sq-km has proven a major stumbling block to a breakthrough deal.

Zelensky refuses to give up land that Russia has not been able to capture in four years of grinding, attritional warfare.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday that Russia's insistence on Ukraine yielding the Donbas was "a very important condition".

A source close to the Kremlin said Moscow considers a so-called "Anchorage formula", which Moscow said was agreed between Trump and Putin at a summit last August, to mean Russia controlling all of Donbas and freezing the current front lines elsewhere in Ukraine's east and south.

In Davos, Zelensky said the Abu Dhabi talks would be the first trilateral meetings involving Ukrainian and Russian envoys and US mediators since the war began.

Russian Admiral Igor Kostyukov, head of Russia's military intelligence agency, was heading Moscow's team in Abu Dhabi. Ukraine's delegation was to be led by Rustem Umerov, secretary of Kyiv's National Security and Defence Council.

Zelensky also told reporters that a deal on US security guarantees for Kyiv was ready, and that he was only waiting on Trump for a specific date and place to sign it.

Ukraine has sought robust security guarantees from Western allies in the event of a peace deal to prevent Russia, which has shown little interest in ending the war, from invading again.

For its part, Russia has floated the idea of using the bulk of nearly $5 billion of Russian assets frozen in the United States to fund a recovery of Russian-occupied territory inside Ukraine. Ukraine, backed by European allies, demands that Russia pay it reparations.

Asked about Russia's idea, Zelensky dismissed it as "nonsense".—Reuters

Scotland Yard probing attacks on Pakistani 'dissidents'

By Our Correspondent

LONDON: UK counter-terrorism police are investigating a series of "highly targeted" attacks against two Pakistani dissidents living in Britain, including a former cabinet member of incarcerated ex-prime minister Imran Khan, according to *The Guardian*.

Scotland Yard's counter-terrorism command took control of the inquiry following four incidents that began Christmas Eve in Cambridgeshire and Buckinghamshire. Authorities have arrested one person in connection with the attacks, one of which involved a firearm.

The violence targeted prominent Khan supporters, including Mirza Shahzad Akbar, a human rights lawyer and former accountability czar. Mr Akbar told *The Guardian* that the attackers appeared "fair-skinned, white or wearing masks".

Mr Akbar said he was first assaulted at his Cambridgeshire home on Dec 24 shortly after 8am. *The Guardian* reported that counter-terrorism officials had warn ed of rising attacks in the UK by criminal proxies.

Call to frame climate change messages in 'people-friendly terms'

Speakers at Thinkfest warn weak budgets, poor water control undermining climate action

By Amjad Mahmood

LAHORE: Linking environmental issues to the economy and development as well as translating the climate change message into language people can relate to were identified as key needs at a ThinkFest session titled, 'Is Climate Governance Working in Pakistan?'

Climate activist `Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Jr said people remained detached from environmental issues because these were never presented in their own context and diction.

"If you ask people in Lahore about the Ravi, they will take time to respond. The same is the case with Karachiites about the Indus," he said.

However, he added, the announcement of the Cholistan Canal project last year triggered strong opposition in Sindh, with the issue even being raised in Friday sermons. "The realisation was there because they saw it in the context of decreasing water levels in the Indus each year," he added.

He suggested communities should identify with natural landmarks, saying Lahorites should attach their identity to the Ravi, people in Multan to the Sutlej and Sindh to the Indus.

Interestingly, he also compared the announcements during air travel to different destinations in Pakistan. He regretted that unlike the Islamabad-Gilgit flight, during which announcements were made about the mountains along the route, no annoucements were made during Karachi-Lahore flights or to other destinations when the plane flies over the lakes of Sanghar, Kirthar Hills or other such beautiful places.

Alleging that each project of the incumbent and of the PTI government was for the elite capture, Zulfikar Jr said the Cholistan agricultural land development was for the wealthy, as no ordinary citizen could get a contract of thousands of acres of land in Cholistan. He called for environmental issues to be linked with the economy and development agenda to broaden public engagement.

'West-driven agenda'

World Wild Fund-Pakistan Director-General Hammad Naqi also urged policymakers to frame climate change as an economic, social and development issue and to counter the impression that it was a Western-driven agenda.

Lamenting at the low priority the successive governments are attaching to climate change, he said this was evident from the poor budget allocated for the environment department, whereas either a newcomer or a close-to-retirement secretary is posted to the environment department.

He regretted the inconsistency in government policies, regretting that if one government emphasises on tree plantation, the other focuses on infrastructure projects that are visible to the public eye. Likewise, every new secretary calls as rubbish the steps introduced by his predecessor, meaning inconsistency in policies and incapacity of the officials.

The WWF-P director general was also unhappy to see the lethargic attitude of the policymakers towards water management. "Only two sitting of the Punjab Water Commissions have been held during the last five years," he said.

He said agriculture policy was also lagging behind climate needs amid limited progress on drought-resilient seeds for different crops and the continued neglect of crop zoning. He added that water-guzzling crops such as sugarcane and rice were still being promoted despite severe water scarcity in the country.

Israel wants more Palestinians 'leaving Gaza'

TEL AVIV: Israel wants to restrict the number of Palestinians entering Gaza through the border crossing with Egypt to ensure that more are allowed out than in, three sources briefed on the matter said ahead of the border's expected opening next week.

The head of a transitional Palestinian committee backed by the US to temporarily administer Gaza, Ali Shaath, announced on Thursday that the Rafah Border Crossing — effectively the sole route in or out of Gaza for nearly all of the more than two million people who live there — would open next week.

The border was supposed to have opened during the initial phase of President Donald Trump's plan to end the war, under a ceasefire reached in October between Israel and Hamas.

Earlier this month, Washington announced that the plan had now moved into the second phase, under which Israel is expected to withdraw troops further from Gaza and Hamas is due to yield control of the territory's administration. The Gaza side of the crossing has been under Israeli military control since 2024.

The three sources, who spoke on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the issue, said it was still not clear how Israel planned to enforce limits on the number of Palestinians entering Gaza from Egypt, or what ratio of exits to entries it aimed to achieve.

Israeli officials have spoken in the past about encouraging Palestinians to emigrate from Gaza, although they deny intending to transfer the population out by force. Palestinians are highly sensitive to any suggestion that Gazans could be expelled, or that those who leave temporarily could be barred from returning.

The Rafah Crossing is expected to be staffed by Palestinians affiliated with the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority and monitored by EU personnel, as took place during an earlier, weeks-long ceasefire between Israel and Hamas early last year.

The three sources said that Israel also wants to establish a military checkpoint inside Gaza near the border, through which all Palestinians entering or leaving would be required to pass and be subjected to Israeli security checks.

Two other sources also said that Israeli officials had insisted on setting up a military checkpoint in Gaza to screen Palestinians moving in and out.—Reuters

Around 200 Pakistani students stuck in Afghanistan seek to return

By Tahir Khan

ISLAMABAD: Nearly 200 Pakistani students stranded in Afghanistan for months due to the closure of the border have demanded permission to cross the Torkham border, according to their representatives.

Taliban authorities have told them that Pakistani diplomatic missions should officially approach them and verify the list with an official stamp. However, Pakistani officials are reluctant to do so, the affected students told *Dawn* from Kabul and Jalalabad.

The Taliban allowed the first group of 26 students to cross Torkham on Jan 12, and Pakistani authorities also opened the border specifically for them.

However, the students who arrived at Torkham on Jan 13 have not yet been allowed to cross, as Taliban authorities insist that the Pakistani embassy or the consulate in Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar province, should officially verify the list.

Dr Riazullah Wazir and Amanullah Wazir, representatives of the students in Kabul, said students had met the Nangarhar governor and officials at the Pakistani embassy and the Jalalabad consulate, but the issue remained unresolved.

Dr Noman Amir, the students' representative in Jalalabad, said the current tensions had multiplied their problems, leaving them stuck in Afghanistan for months. He added that the students could not cross the border despite repeated requests to authorities on both sides.

"Visas of many students have expired, and they cannot travel to Islamabad due to the border closure. Dozens of students are also stuck in Pakistan and are facing difficulties attending exams and classes in Afghanistan," Dr Amir, a final-year medical student in Jalalabad, told *Dawn*.

FO says Kabul embassy is in touch with Pakistani community there.—Dawn

Foreign Office spokesperson Tahir Andrabi said the Pakistani Embassy in Kabul remained in contact with the Pakistani community and assistance was extended to those who approached it.

"We will explore how these 200 students can be facilitated. It is currently winter holidays, and many students may be seeking to return during this time. We will review the situation accordingly after receiving updated information from our embassy," Mr Andrabi said at his weekly briefing.

However, Dr Amir said that the parents of a couple of students had passed away in Pakistan, but the students were unable to attend their funerals.

"Our exams have ended and winter vacations have already started in Afghanistan, but students still cannot go to Pakistan," he said. He added that students had contacted officials on both sides, but no one had taken "our problems seriously".

He appealed to PM Shehbaz Sharif and President Asif Ali Zardari to take notice of their situation and find a solution to their problem.

A Pakistani official, requesting not to be identified, told *Dawn* that the Torkham border was meant to remain open for two days, Jan 12 and 13. He said Pakistan had taken the decision after students stated in a video that the Afghan side had promised to allow them to cross the border.

"We held consultations in Islamabad and decided to open Torkham for our students. But now the Taliban have attached conditions for allowing them to cross," he said, adding that Pakistan had also agreed to open the border for more students even after Jan 13.

The problem started when students arrived at Torkham on Jan 13 after the first group had already entered Pakistan.

"We spent two nights at Torkham and were hoping to cross the border, but it did not happen," students said in a video posted online.

One student said the Afghan interior ministry told them to have the list verified with an official stamp from the Pakistani embassy. He claimed that neither the embassy nor the consulate agreed to the demand. However, a consulate official said the mission was in contact with the students as well as officials in Islamabad to resolve the issue.

An official in Islamabad said Pakistan would not make any official communication with the Taliban authorities.

"If they allow the students [to cross], we will open the border crossing," the official told *Dawn*.

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